

7-1-1989

Sheldon, Iowa during World War II

Clarence Andrews

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Andrews, Clarence. "Sheldon, Iowa during World War II." *The Palimpsest* 70 (1989), 146-155.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol70/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Sheldon, Iowa during World War II

by Clarence Andrews

IN 1941—the year World War II started for the United States — Sheldon, Iowa, in northwest O'Brien County, was a town of about 3,800 people. That summer my wife and I moved to Sheldon, where I took the job of secretary to the Chamber of Commerce. From that position, I had a close-up view of how the war would gradually affect Sheldon, particularly its merchant community.

Before the war, Sheldon merchants, especially those dependent on the farm trade, had kept their businesses open ten or eleven hours a day. On Saturday nights store owners had never thought of closing until eleven o'clock. Farm families would drive into town to see a movie at the Iowa Theater or stand on the sidewalks talking, men in one group, women in another. "Some farmers do more farming in town on Saturday nights than they do all week out on the acres," one wag had said. Then at the last minute they would crowd into the shops to buy necessary supplies. As war-time merchandise shortages developed, Sheldon merchants began to cut back their hours, except for those who repaired automobiles and farm machinery — those people would work longer hours than ever.

As a newcomer in Sheldon, I soon noted that



for many businesses there were, as the Rotary charter would have it, "one man and his competitor." There were two drug stores, two variety stores, two barbershops, two men's clothing stores, two jewelry stores, two newspapers, and so on. Often a "Hollander" would own one of these, an Irish Catholic the other



(much of the Sheldon population was made up of those who attended either one of the two Dutch Reformed churches or St. Patrick's Church). Two "cabin camps" on the outskirts of town served tourists passing through Sheldon.

Breaking the pattern, there were three railroad lines, several auto dealers and service

Sheldon townspeople close their businesses to watch Company I of the Iowa National Guard, inducted into the regular army, march to the depot in February 1941.

stations, three lumberyards, two implement dealers, two grain elevators, one hotel, four or five grocery stores, two restaurants (the Iowana Cafe was a "candy kitchen" owned by a Greek

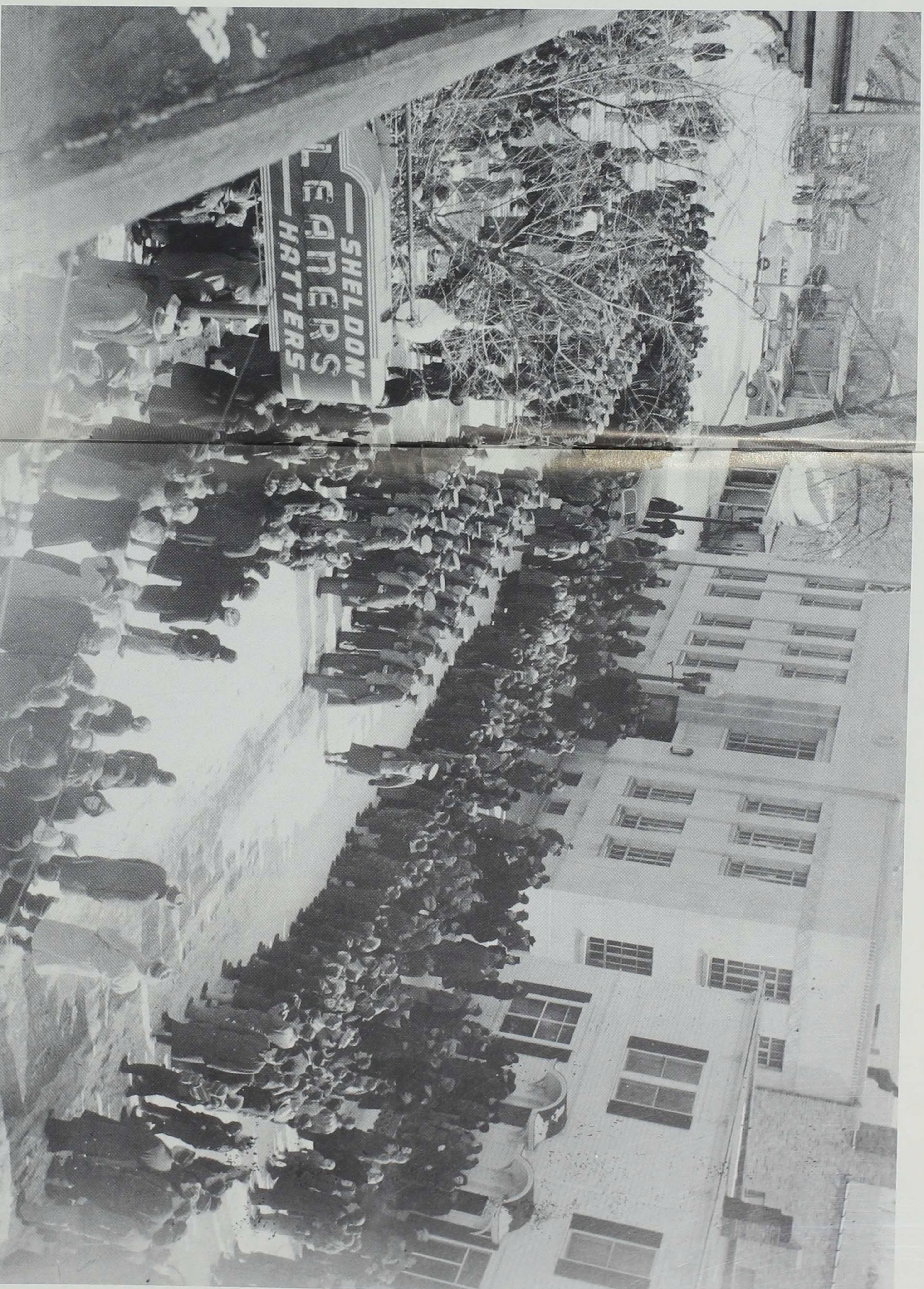
Sheldon, Iowa during World War II

by Clarence Andrews

IN 1941—the year World War II started for the United States — Sheldon, Iowa, in northwest O'Brien County, was a town of about 3,800 people. That summer my wife and I moved to Sheldon, where I took the job of secretary to the Chamber of Commerce. From that position, I had a close-up view of how the war would gradually affect Sheldon, particularly its merchant community.

Before the war, Sheldon merchants, especially those dependent on the farm trade, had kept their businesses open ten or eleven hours a day. On Saturday nights store owners had never thought of closing until eleven o'clock. Farm families would drive into town to see a movie at the Iowa Theater or stand on the sidewalks talking, men in one group, women in another. "Some farmers do more farming in town on Saturday nights than they do all week out on the acres," one wag had said. Then at the last minute they would crowd into the shops to buy necessary supplies. As war-time merchandise shortages developed, Sheldon merchants began to cut back their hours, except for those who repaired automobiles and farm machinery—those people would work longer hours than ever.

As a newcomer in Sheldon, I soon noted that



COURTESY SHELDON MAIL-SUN

for many businesses there were, as the Rotary charter would have it, "one man and his competitor." There were two drug stores, two variety stores, two barbershops, two men's clothing stores, two jewelry stores, two newspapers, and so on. Often a "Hollander" would own one of these, an Irish Catholic the other

(much of the Sheldon population was made up of those who attended either one of the two Dutch Reformed churches or St. Patrick's Church). Two "cabin camps" on the outskirts of town served tourists passing through Sheldon. Breaking the pattern, there were three railroad lines, several auto dealers and service

Sheldon townspeople close their businesses to watch Company I of the Iowa National Guard, inducted into the regular army, march to the depot in February 1941. stations, three lumberyards, two implement dealers, two grain elevators, one hotel, four or five grocery stores, two restaurants (the Lowana Cafe was a "candy kitchen" owned by a Greek

family — nearly every small Iowa town had one of these) — and one theater.

Almost all of the merchants and lawyers and other professional people depended directly or indirectly on the 72,500 farmers and townspeople who constituted the population of the “Big Four” counties — Osceola, O’Brien, Lyon, and Sioux. The income from grain, livestock, and farm produce, and the million and a half dollars in checks from federal farm agencies, flowed annually through the farmers’ hands into the merchants’ cash registers, offsetting the steady flow of dollars from the merchants to their suppliers in the Twin Cities, Omaha, Des Moines, and Chicago.

To compete for these dollars with businesses in four county-seat towns and other nearby towns, the Sheldon Chamber of Commerce staged various events — such as an annual air show. The first air show had been staged in 1932 in a cow pasture. With the help of federal Works Progress Administration funds, the pasture had since been converted into an airport and christened “Roscoe Turner Field” after the nationally known flier, who came to Sheldon for the occasion. (Turner had won several international air races, had appeared in films, and was often photographed either with a movie star or an African lion that flew with him in his two-seater plane.)

When we came to Sheldon in 1941, it was to fill the chamber secretary position vacated by John Chapman, who had left for military service. Just thirteen days before the air show, I met with Mayor L. A. “Hap” Houlihan (who was also the town’s funeral director), Chamber of Commerce president Richard F. “Dick” Kehrberg (who owned the Iowa Theater), department store owner Louis Wolf, insurance agent John Walters, and Dr. Kermit Myers. These men were the prime movers behind the air show. With them was Al Vint, owner of one of the barbershops, who was president of the Sheldon Chapter of the National Aeronautic Association (Chapter Number 1), and who had probably logged more flying time than all the other local flying enthusiasts together. Moreover, Vint was a close friend of Roscoe Turner and many American fliers. In the next two weeks, I spent a great many hours in Vint’s barbershop, making telephone connections

with an assortment of stunt pilots while he trimmed hair and shaved whiskers. Once the connections were made, Vint did the talking.

Sunday, August 17 was the first day of the air show. An unexpected chilly drizzle forced cancellation of the parachute jumps and other events but not the featured attraction, a “wedding in the clouds.” Local ministers had decried the wedding as bordering on the sacrilegious (particularly on a Sunday) and refused to take part. So Mayor Hap Houlihan was pressed into service in his official capacity and his black undertaker’s suit, even though there was some question about his authority outside — or above — the city limits. Hap, the bride and groom (a local couple), and Al Vint in dual role as pilot and witness, crowded into the small plane and the wedding took place as



Until the war took hold, the Chamber of Commerce staged attractions such as the air show, officiated here by pilot Roscoe Turner (left) and barber Al Vint.



Leaving for "war games" in 1941, Company I would later head for Ireland, still closer to the war in Europe.

advertised. Loudspeakers broadcast the ceremony to the audience below. But due to the weather, the admission was only a portion of what we needed to pay our bills. We were fortunate that there was just enough moisture in the rain gauge to satisfy the terms of our insurance policy. The check was enough to leave us with a hundred-dollar balance.

Although we began to talk of next year's show with hopes of better weather, that would be Sheldon's last air show. Already the Sheldon Junior College was conducting pre-flight training for future military pilots at Roscoe Turner Field, and World War II would prevent any more community-sponsored air shows.

DESPITE PRESIDENT Roosevelt's claim that he "hated war," there had been ominous implications for the nation's future. The Nazi invasion of Holland and the European coastal lowlands was a major concern for the sizable number of area Dutch families (and those elsewhere in the state) who had strong family and religious ties to Holland and the Friesland community along

the North Sea. Sons of several area families had been drafted for one year of service beginning in October of 1940. On a cold snowy day in February of 1941, the town had virtually closed down as business people, preachers, teachers, schoolchildren, and parents had marched to Sheldon's Union Depot with the members of Company I of the Iowa National Guard, which had been inducted ("federalized") into the regular army. That August, as the townspeople had prepared for the air show, Company I, with a half million other soldiers, had participated in three months of "war games" in eastern Texas and southern Louisiana. Now the soldiers were being told that their one year of service was being extended.

But life in Sheldon, as elsewhere, had to go on. The Farmers Cooperative Elevator was building a new high-rise concrete grain storage bin ("a prairie skyscraper") adjacent to the Omaha tracks. I proposed to the Chamber of Commerce that the town celebrate with a "Farmers' Day." The idea wasn't immediately accepted. Some Sheldon citizens were still bitter over the demise of the Sheldon District Fair

after 1922 (and envious of the subsequent growth of the Clay County Fair forty miles to the east). Some merchants continued the age-old argument that the cooperative concept (represented in Sheldon by the elevator and a cooperative oil company) was against free enterprise and therefore shouldn't be celebrated. The manager of the small Quaker Oats elevator in Sheldon (which was then being sued by the cooperative elevator) also opposed the idea and found many supporters among business people and others. Nevertheless, the Sheldon Farmers' Day was set for Saturday, November 8. The day began with a parade of farm tractors, trucks, and other implements, but just as a free picnic lunch was about to be served along Second Avenue, with the new grain bin looming in the background, the rain came. That night a speaker recited the history of the American cooperative movement to an audience of farmers crowded into the Community Building auditorium, where Company I had drilled nine months earlier.

The Chamber of Commerce and the merchants next geared up for the busiest season of the year—the Christmas season. In the past this had been inaugurated with a Santa Claus handing out candy at the Community Building, but I proposed that the chamber bring in an outfit from Fort Dodge for a parade on Saturday, December 6. The parade included floats, the three Wise Men on camels, shepherds with sheep, Santa Claus and "Mary Christmas." Some merchants argued for only the traditional Santa Claus, but when I pointed out that the parade producer furnished several dozen costumes for local children to wear in the parade, the proposal carried — provided Santa Claus would still hand out candy.

Still there were the doomsayers who knew too well Iowa's unpredictable weather. They looked back to the drizzle and rain for the air show and Farmers' Day, and recalled that just a year before on Armistice Day, one of the worst blizzards in the history of northwest Iowa had trapped pheasant and duck hunters and had caused several deaths. But December 6 was warm and sunny (for northwest Iowa) and the parade went off as planned. Even the doomsayers were all smiles as parents crowded into the stores to begin shopping.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, my wife and I were sitting in our apartment reading the Sunday Sioux City newspaper when there was a knock on our door. It was our neighbors, Betty and Earl Smith.

"Aren't you listening to the radio?" they asked.

"Why should we?"

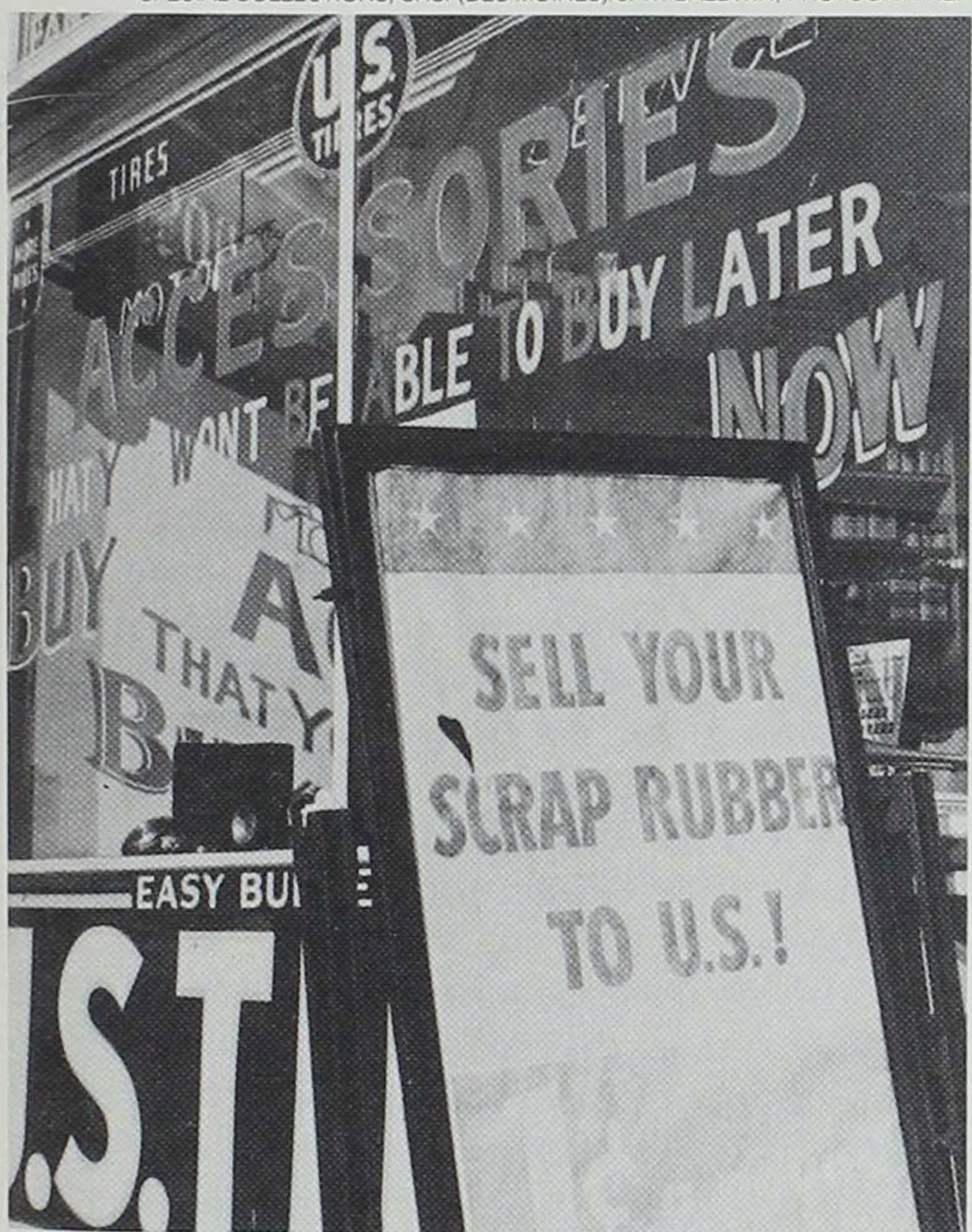
"The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii," they said. They looked at each other apprehensively. Betty and Earl had been married only a short time, and he was a grocery wholesaler — not a critical occupation — with a low draft number.

We had barely turned on the radio when the phone rang. It was Dick Kehrberg. "Call the chamber directors for an 8 A.M. meeting Monday morning," he instructed.

The holiday glow from Saturday was gone as we met in the chamber's office the next morning. "We'll be at war with the Japanese *and* the Axis within a day or two," Kehrberg said. "From now on we can forget petty differences — winning the war will be our only concern. There will be shortages and rationing of consumer goods, an increase in the draft, higher taxes, price controls, shortages of manpower."

We all knew that the Christmas furloughs promised to Company I would be cancelled, and we now realized that some of the boys might never see Sheldon or their families again. Soon the Iowa National Guard was in Ireland, and our radios were carrying a popular song, "Johnny Doughboy Found a Rose in Ireland." But the song was not warmly received by Sheldon young women whose boyfriends and fiancés were now quartered there.

The Chamber of Commerce began securing merchant participation in the war effort. Through the influence of "Tobe" Diamond (the Northern Iowa Federal District Attorney and almost the only Democrat in town), Sheldon became the headquarters for war bond and defense stamp sales in northwest Iowa. As in many other Iowa communities, the City of Sheldon, the McGlothen-Cowie American Legion Post, and the Chamber of Commerce erected a billboard which would display the name of every resident who would serve in the Armed Forces during World War II. Gold



A Des Moines sign for scrap rubber repeats the message all Iowans were hearing: save and salvage for the war.

stars would be placed beside the names of those killed in action.

The Chamber of Commerce also became the center for instituting ration and price controls in several counties. Automobile owners received "A," "B," or "C" coupon books for gasoline, depending on the owners' occupations and the uses to which automobiles were put. "A" books were issued to those who used their automobiles for non-essential purposes, "B" books to those who drove to essential jobs in industry or food preparation, and "C" books to those who contributed significantly to the war effort. Automobile tires could be purchased only with a certificate specifying the need for tires in aiding the war effort.

Colonel H. G. Geiger, who had commanded Company I in World War I, headed the committee handling the details of rationing. At its first meeting he looked around the room. "Before we get to our main problem," he said, "I have one. Last fall I bought a set of new tires for my car, intending to put them on in the spring." He was obviously aware of how it would look for the committee chairperson to sport new tires.

Board members told him to keep the tires. We reminded him that people knew he was an honest man who, moreover, had had a long record of military service.

"But people will still say I used my position on this committee to get the tires," the colonel said. So he returned the tires. Within the week, townspeople knew the name of the man who had purchased the colonel's tires from the dealer — without the necessary certificate and at a good profit for the seller. In small towns, news travels fast.

Controls to prevent inflation of prices for scarce merchandise presented a difficult problem, as I soon found out in discussions with merchants. Regulations required that they price merchandise on the basis of late summer prices. But retailers of women's clothing pointed out that in the late summer they had been having sales of summer styles, and the sales prices should not be applied to new fall merchandise. Moreover, merchants in area towns complained because the new regulations were being explained by the Chamber of Commerce secretary from Sheldon, rather than by representatives of their own communities.

In February, Sheldon became a center for a company of the Iowa State Guard, which replaced the now-absent National Guard. The federal government could not mobilize the State Guard in any way; it would be used only within Iowa as the governor might order — as a police auxiliary in civil disorders, or against Axis sympathizers engaged in acts of sabotage or espionage.

Sheldon became headquarters for the First Battalion (Northern Iowa) of the Iowa State Guard, with Dr. (later colonel) C. N. Struyker in command, and the site of Company B of the Second (Northwest Iowa) Regiment. Company B filled up at once, its roster consisting of older men (such as Hap Houlihan and area farmer Thys Koole, both in their mid-fifties); married men (who at that time did not anticipate federal service); and young men of pre-draft age (who believed that service with the State Guard might make them better soldiers when the time came for federal service). Many of the new soldiers were Sheldon businessmen. As in the case of Company I, a number of members were from Sioux Center,

Orange City, Boyden, Hull, and other area towns.

IN THE SPRING of 1942 the war was brought home to us in an unusual way. Every year a young Japanese-American had come to Sheldon to sort male and female chicks, newly hatched at Skewis Hatchery. But now owner Mason Skewis announced that his chicken sexer would not be able to come to Sheldon; he was in an internment camp in California.

Another war-related event occurred that spring that would ultimately lead to major changes in Iowa's agriculture and also produce Sheldon's biggest business. Everett Scholten, a director of the Farmers Elevator, and I attended a meeting in Mankato, Minnesota, at which federal Department of Agriculture representatives asked those attending to emphasize the importance of growing soybeans on our area farms. A relatively unknown Chinese legume at that time, soybeans were a potential source of protein and oil — the latter badly needed since Japanese successes in the Pacific had ended imports of coconut oil. In the course of the meeting, Scholten and I asked how oil was obtained from soybeans. We were told that mills would have to be built to process the beans, and that one of the byproducts was soybean meal, which could be fed to farm animals.

In Sheldon, officers of the chamber and the Farmers Co-op elevator met at once to discuss the possibility of a soybean mill in Sheldon to be operated by the co-op. At that time the co-op was suing the Quaker Oats Company on the grounds that its Sheldon elevator had been illegally operating in restraint of trade. Now an agreement was reached — Quaker Oats would sell its ancient, small, wooden elevator to the co-op, and the co-op would drop the suit.

The Quaker facility, on the Omaha tracks only a block from the co-op, became the site of the Big Four Co-op Soybean Processing Mill, its name derived from its ownership by farmer-owned cooperatives in the four northwest Iowa counties. This cooperation meant that more than ever, Sheldon would become the focus of farm activity in the four counties. The following spring northwest Iowa farmers began planting

soybeans in quantity, and by the fall of 1943, under the management of Charles "Chuck" Hanson, the Big Four Mill would produce its first oil and meal.

AS THE NATION slowly began the enormous effort to fight three well-prepared and experienced adversaries on at least three distant fronts, Sheldon began to seek other means to do its part. With no industry to convert to war production, the area's biggest contributions were obviously food production and men and women for the armed forces.

Dick Kehrberg proposed a symbolic device to focus the townspeople on the war effort. Ten-gallon cream cans with red, white, and blue stripes were attached to electrolier posts in the business district. A poster attached to each can urged passersby to drop in their small change. The money would be given to the federal government to buy arms. Sheldon got state-wide publicity for this idea, but little money.

Then our neighbor, Betty Smith, a former music teacher, composed a pageant, "When Will Sheldon Seek Shelter?" The huge cast outnumbered the audience. As the cast sang, "And Company B's a joy to see/As it parades most manfully . . ." members of the company, in uniform with shotguns on their shoulders, marched in the front doors of the Community Building auditorium and down the aisles to the stage.

In the spring and summer of 1942, volunteers for the war effort took over the chamber office. There was barely room for my desk. One thing became clear to me: the original reasons for my employment no longer existed. At the end of August, the directors and I agreed that I could probably serve the war effort better elsewhere.

Throughout the 1930s I had sold and serviced office machines. In recent months Sheldon business people had already called upon me to service their machines. Repairmen from Sioux City and Sioux Falls would no

Opposite: Dick Kehrberg (Chamber of Commerce president) and Mayor L. A. "Hap" Houlihan check homefront donations in a Penny-a-Day can on a Sheldon street.



COURTESY SHELDON HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND MUSEUM



Young people joined in scrap metal drives and other efforts to salvage materials during the war.

longer travel to Sheldon because of gasoline rationing and the difficulty of buying tires and automobile parts. They didn't need Sheldon's business anyway. Because new machines were not available, they had plenty of repair work in their own hometowns.

I rented a vacant room in the basement of the Schneider brothers' Security State Bank and opened "The House of Andrews." Because this business was classified as important to the war effort I was granted a deferment from military service and a "C" coupon book for gasoline. I hired two young men to help me repair office machines. But it was not long before I had the same manpower shortage facing other businesses; one was on his way to the navy and the other on his way to the army.

THE WAR was affecting other businesses and organizations in Sheldon. The junior college closed its doors because of shortages of teachers and male students, and its training program for pilots was taken over by the school district at a new airport northeast of town. Al Vint closed his barbershop and moved to Texas to train pilots for the army, and Gene Turner, who shined shoes in the barbershop, left with him.

Other familiar faces began disappearing

from the streets and shops and from Company B as well, as men enlisted or were drafted. Other men, in non-essential civilian jobs but ineligible for the draft, said goodbye to their families and left to take jobs in war industries, mostly in aircraft factories and shipyards on the West Coast. Several businesses closed their doors "for the duration." It became easy for Sheldonites to understand the popular song, "They're either too young or too old," which lamented the scarcity of male companions for young ladies left behind.

Those who stayed were finding their own ways of helping. Housewives donated unusable cooking fats. Citizens brought in rusting farm implements and junk automobiles beyond repair to be melted down with Minnesota iron ore to produce steel for armaments. Automobile owners were asked to turn in floor mats, even though the rubber in them was of limited use, and even though hardware stores continued to sell new floor mats. Schoolchildren were sent out into the country to collect milkweed pods; the floss would be used to fill flotation jackets for air crews forced down over the Pacific or the Atlantic.

A meat-packing plant in Estherville offered good prices for surplus horseflesh. As the horse population dropped, "steak" and "hamburger" from goat meat and horsemeat fed the Armed Forces. Leaders of chow lines at the doors of

army mess halls would whinny back to those behind them, whereupon many of the latter would repair to the Service Club for a hamburger — which often as not was made of goat meat.

The Iowana Cafe closed because the sugar shortage cut off the supply of many of its sweets. On one occasion, a Sheldon grocery wholesaler discovered an Iowa corn-processing plant that would trade sugar for badly needed corn. A salesman for the wholesaler found a nearby farmer with surplus corn in storage. A deal was made and soon Sheldon area grocers had a supply of sugar.

Finally the war struck home in the most severe way. In January 1943, Company I with other Iowa National Guard companies landed at Oran, Algeria, on the Mediterranean coast. In Tunisia in early February they came up against the experienced Afrika Korps of Nazi general Erwin Rommel. On February 20, Private Wallace L. Bunker, trying to rescue wounded companions, was killed. Bunker was the first Sheldon soldier to lose his life in World War II. On the night of April 8, three more died in the battle for Fondouk Pass. Still in Tunisia, in the even bloodier battle for "Hill 609," Staff Sergeant William Stryk, one of four Sheldon brothers in Company I, was killed.

THE 75,000 Italian and German soldiers who surrendered in Tunisia, after Hill 609 and Fondouk Pass, were to have some significance to me. Several hundred of these men were brought to Iowa to help short-handed Iowa farmers produce food. They were housed in prisoner-of-war camps, one of which was at Algona, eighty miles east of Sheldon. When the Algona camp opened, I received a contract to service the camp's office machines. I suggested to the camp quartermaster, a former Sheldon resident, that because of the uncertainties I faced regarding the draft or enlistment, the camp should set up its own repair shop. I would train two or three mechanically minded "Kriegies" to repair and adjust machines.

And so I came into personal contact with several of the men who had faced Sheldon soldiers in combat. My impressions of them,

conditioned by several years of journalistic accounts of the fanaticism of Hitler and Mussolini, soon changed. They talked about their wives, their children, their parents, their hometowns. And although they insisted that Hitler would win the war, they longed for it to end so they could return home.

By June of 1944, the Armed Forces were drafting men with children, including many of my Sheldon business associates. So I decided to ask my draft board to cancel my deferred status. On June 7 I made my last trip to the Algona prisoner-of-war camp. There I showed the prisoners that morning's *Des Moines Register* with its story and photos of the Allied landing at Normandy the day before. They refused to believe what they saw. "That's American propaganda," they said. "You'll never be able to invade Hitler's *Festung Europa*."

I told them that I would soon be in the Armed Forces. One man reached into his pocket, took out a pocket knife, opened it, and placed the point against my throat. "Better I cut your throat than you go into the army," he said.

Another prisoner broke the tension. "If they're taking him," he said to the others, "the American army really is desperate."

On Monday, August 14 — just three years after Sheldon's air show — I stood at attention in Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, raised my right arm, and promised to serve my country faithfully. I was gone for twenty months and served on a B-29 crew in the U.S. Army Air Force. On May 2, 1946, almost ten months after the Japanese surrendered, I returned home to Sheldon on the Omaha railroad. As I waited for the baggage wagon to bring my B-4 bag, "Zip" Hudson, the depot agent, came up beside me. "Why are you still wearing a uniform?" he asked.

For most of Sheldon, the war had already ended. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources consulted for this article include back issues of the *Sheldon Mail* (including the "40 Years Ago" column); the *Sheldon Area Centennial, 1872-1972*; and Richard E. Bauer's *The Spirit of the Guard: The Iowa National Guard in Two Wars* (Lake Mills, Iowa, 1981). Special thanks to Ralph Hollander, Richard Bauer, and the *Sheldon Mail-Sun* for helping to locate photographs.